

Protecting Your Wildland Home from Wildfire

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HISTORICALLY, Alabama wildfires threaten tracts of land, destroying trees and wildlife habitat, and impacting water quality. Lives and personal property have always been top priority with firefighters, but were seldom victim to the unpredictability of wildfires.

Wildfires in the 1990s, however, were a serious menace to personal property. The difference may be the increasing number of homes and vacation houses springing up in what used to be rural land. In the fall of 1999, a significant number of barns, automobiles, mobile homes and other structures were destroyed by wildfire statewide.

As cities expand into wildland areas and urban workers escape city life as a commuter or by way of a vacation retreat, the risk of careless actions by homeowners increases the risk of wildfires. Moreover, the scenic beauty that attracted homeowners to the area is in jeopardy of being changed forever. House fires are traditionally controlled by municipal firefighters using hoses and

water from fire mains and hydrants.

Wildland firefighters, on the other hand, are usually funded by agencies charged with the protection of woodlands and their valuable natural resources. These firefighters are equipped and trained to attack the fronts of fires indirectly, usually by establishing a defensible perimeter in front of the fire and clearing out all fuel along the line of the perimeter.

The term “wildland/urban interface” refers to the geographical areas where urban structures—mainly residences—are built in close proximity to flammable fuels found naturally in wildland areas, including forests, prairies, hillsides and valleys. The result can be aesthetically desirable or disastrous.

Fires in the interface present problems for both sides. Interface areas typically do not have water systems capable of providing the large volumes of water needed for structural firefighting. Meanwhile, the number of homes in the area sometimes makes it difficult to use the perimeter control method.

As urban areas expand into wildland areas, the conflicts are becoming more commonplace. Just as wildland fires threaten people and property, fires caused by human behavior threaten Alabama’s forests.

Although Alabama agencies are learning to work together effectively to control fires, individual homeowners must do their part to minimize risks.

Fire Behavior

- To better understand how you can protect your home from wildfire, it is important to know how fire behaves.
- Fire needs fuel and oxygen. Your home is a form of fuel and the wind provides plenty of oxygen.
- A fire moving up slope moves faster and has longer flames than one on level ground because hot gases rise in front of it, pre-heating the path.
- Burning embers can be carried more than a mile by the wind, landing on roofs, decks and vents.
- When the fire gets closer, its heat and flames directly threaten the home, causing combustible materials to ignite, plastic to melt and glass windows to shatter.

Action You Can Take

The first priority of firefighters is protecting people’s lives. Protecting property and resources is secondary. You can help improve their firefighting efforts by making your property a place to effectively battle a blaze and making it more likely that your structure will be saved.

- Make sure firefighters can find your home by marking your driveway clearly with your family name and address.
- Make sure that emergency vehicles



Prune all trees up to 6-10 feet from the ground and remove overhanging branches.



Store firewood away from your home.

can reach your home. A narrow, winding drive can be charming but it may prevent firefighting equipment from reaching your home if it is too narrow for two-way traffic, too steep for large equipment or has turns that are too sharp for big trucks. Drives should be at least 12 feet wide with a vertical clearance of 15 feet. Provide a turnaround at the house large enough for heavy trucks.

- Construct your home away from any land features that might channel the flow of the wind. Locate your home at least 30 feet from a ridge or cliff.
- A major cause of home loss during wildfires is the flammability of roofing materials. Consider non-combustible or fire-resistant materials, such as Class-A asphalt, metal or cement.
- Cover exterior attic and underfloor vents with wire mesh no larger than 1/8 inch to prevent sparks from being drawn into your home.
- Install spark arresters on small engines and equipment. Cover chimney with a half-inch screen spark-arrester.

Your home can make its first and best stand against a wildfire through firewise landscaping and maintenance. By creating a safety zone or firebreak around your wildland home, you can keep a fire from getting near.

- Stack firewood 30-100 feet upslope.
- Remove things that burn easily from at least 30 feet around the house and at least 100 feet away on the down hill side.
- Evergreen trees burn easily. Prune their lower limbs, and thin the trees or remove them from around your home.
- Space yard trees and shrubs at least 15-20 feet apart.
- Prune limbs 15 feet from the ground to prevent fire from spreading to the tops of the trees.
- Clean gutters and roof of leaves and limbs.
- Remove tree limbs that hang over your roof and power lines.
- Remove combustible materials and

Attend the Firewise Communities Workshop

Wildfires in the fall of 1999 and the spring and summer of 2000 have brought the issue of wildland/urban interface fire to the door in Alabama. Now is the time to do a better job of community planning in this region. The Firewise Communities Workshop deals with factoring wildland fire protection into homes and communities before they are built. This workshop will give you the opportunity to learn how to apply firewise principles in Alabama.

The 2 1/2-day event focuses on a state-of-the-art fire protection planning exercise. You will be placed on a team that determines which firewise characteristics will be integrated into the design and infrastructure of a hypothetical community. You will hear from both wildland fire researchers about their current findings on home ignitability and communities that have adopted fire protection programs—and how they did it.

Learn to recognize fire hazards that threaten wildland living and to incorporate firewise planning into existing and developing areas of your community. This workshop is a networking opportunity for both concerned professionals and individuals who deal with the important issue of wildland fire protection.

For \$250, which includes meals and lodging, you will receive:

- Instruction in a new, state-of-the-art community planning program
- A participant's workbook and a CD which teaches you to plan, and build, a Firewise community
- Access to continued training in planning and GIS via the Internet after the workshop

Full scholarships are available for active volunteer members of volunteer fire departments, community planning boards and the American Red Cross.

The Firewise Community Workshop will be held in Atlanta, Georgia on October 18-20, 2000, at the Emory Conference Center. Attendance is limited to 100 participants.

For more information, contact Roger Browning of the Georgia Forestry Commission at 912-751-3504; e-mail FirewiseHP@aol.com; or visit www.firewise.org/communities.

debris that accumulate under decks and terraces.

- Don't attach wooden fences to your home. Consider adding a stone or concrete pillar at the end closest to the house.

Though you can never fully protect your home and adjacent woodlands against wildfires, you can take steps to reduce the risk. After all, it is a small price to pay for the many benefits of rural life.

For more information on Alabama's wildland/urban interface program contact Harry Kepler at 1-800-452-5923.

References

National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Protection Program

www.firewise.org

www.nps.gov

www.fire.nifc.gov

Teacher's Lesson Guide for "Fire in My Backyard" 